

Decolonizing Digital Conflict: Epistemic Friction in Indonesian Digital Communication

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Decolonizing Communication; Digital Conflict; Epistemic Friction; Harmony Oriented Communication; Indonesian Digital Communication; Southeast Asian Digital Communication

Digital communication platforms have transformed how individuals interact, participate in public discourse, and negotiate social meaning. While these platforms enable unprecedented connectivity, they have also intensified the emergence of digital conflict, manifested in polarization, public shaming, and rapid escalation of interpersonal disputes across networked publics. Existing explanations of digital conflict often emphasize technological affordances, algorithmic amplification, or psychological dynamics of online interaction. Although these perspectives provide important insights, they often overlook the cultural and epistemological foundations that shape communication practices across societies. This paper argues that understanding digital conflicts must take into account the interaction between digital infrastructure and the epistemology of communication rooted in culture. Drawing on the Indonesian context, the study introduces the concept of epistemic friction to explain tensions that arise when relational communication traditions encounter digital platforms structured around visibility, immediacy, and engagement. Indonesian communication practices have long been shaped by cultural orientations emphasizing harmony, contextual sensitivity, and the preservation of social relationships. When such harmony-oriented communication operates in digital environments that reward expressive visibility and emotional engagement, misalignments may emerge, contributing to the escalation of digital conflict. By conceptualizing digital conflict through the lens of epistemic friction, this paper contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize communication theory. Rather than treating Western models of communicative confrontation as universal, the framework proposed here foregrounds indigenous communication epistemologies as valuable sources of theoretical insight. The study therefore offers a culturally grounded perspective for understanding digital communication dynamics in Indonesia and other societies where relational communication traditions intersect with globally standardized digital platforms.

1. Introduction

Digital communication platforms have become central infrastructures of contemporary social interaction. Across the world, social media networks mediate how individuals exchange information, negotiate identity, and participate in public discourse. While these technologies have expanded opportunities for communication and participation, they have also intensified the visibility of communicative tensions and conflicts within digital environments. From political polarization and online harassment to public shaming and viral controversies, digital conflict has become a recurring feature of networked communication systems (Papacharissi, 2015; Gillespie, 2014; Vaidhyathan, 2018).

Scholars have increasingly sought to explain the emergence of digital conflict through technological affordances and behavioral dynamics of online interaction. Research on online disinhibition suggests that anonymity and reduced social cues may encourage more confrontational communication (Suler, 2004; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Other studies emphasize the role of algorithms and platform architectures in amplifying emotionally charged content and reinforcing communicative polarization (Bucher, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). While these perspectives provide valuable insights into the structural dynamics of digital communication, they often overlook the cultural and epistemological foundations that shape communication practices across different societies.

This limitation becomes particularly visible in contexts where communication traditions emphasize relational harmony rather than expressive confrontation. In many Asian societies, including Indonesia, communication practices are shaped by cultural norms that prioritize relational balance, contextual sensitivity, and social cohesion (Kim, 2002; Yum, 1988). When such relational communication traditions increasingly operate within digital platforms structured around visibility, immediacy, and algorithmic engagement, tensions may emerge between culturally grounded communicative expectations and platform-mediated communication logics.

One of the most widely discussed consequences of this transformation is the growing prevalence of digital conflict. Digital platforms frequently host confrontational debates, public shaming, harassment, and emotionally charged disputes that can escalate rapidly across networked publics. Scholars have argued that the architecture of social media platforms tends to reward visibility, engagement, and affective intensity, often amplifying controversial and conflictual content (Bucher, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). In such environments, communicative escalation can occur quickly as emotionally provocative narratives circulate through algorithmic amplification and participatory engagement. As a result, digital conflict has become a recurring feature of contemporary communication environments rather than a marginal phenomenon.

These dynamics are particularly visible in Indonesia, one of the largest digital societies in the world. The rapid expansion of internet connectivity and mobile communication has transformed everyday communication practices nationwide. According to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), Indonesia had more than 221 million internet users in 2023, while global digital reports estimate over 143 million social media user identities actively participating in digital communication networks (APJII, 2023; DataReportal, 2024). Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and X have become central infrastructures for interpersonal interaction, community engagement, and public discourse.

While digital connectivity has facilitated new forms of participation and social interaction, it has also intensified communicative tensions in Indonesian digital spaces. Political debates, religious controversies, celebrity disputes, and everyday interpersonal disagreements frequently circulate on social media, often escalating into broader public conflicts. Research on Indonesian digital media has shown how social media environments can amplify polarization, emotional narratives, and identity-based mobilization (Lim, 2017; Tapsell, 2018). These dynamics illustrate how digital platforms not only mediate communication but also shape the conditions under which public conflict emerges and spreads.

Recent viral controversies further illustrate how digital communication environments can rapidly transform interpersonal disputes into large-scale public conflicts. One example is the widely discussed online dispute involving Dwi Sasetyaningtyas (DS) in February 2026, which circulated widely across Indonesian social media platforms. Within a short period of time, the case attracted extensive public commentary, moral judgment, and polarized reactions from online audiences who were not directly involved in the original interaction. What initially appeared as a localized interpersonal disagreement quickly evolved into a broader public controversy as narratives about the incident spread across platforms such as X, TikTok, and Instagram. The rapid circulation of commentary and emotional responses illustrates how digital platforms can amplify communicative tensions through algorithmic visibility and collective participation.

The dynamics of such controversies reflect broader structural features of digital communication environments. Social media platforms collapse diverse audiences into shared spaces, exposing communication to multiple interpretive contexts simultaneously. This phenomenon, often described as context collapse, can destabilize communicative expectations and increase the likelihood of

misunderstanding and conflict escalation (boyd, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011). As messages circulate across networked publics, audiences with different social backgrounds, cultural assumptions, and relational expectations interpret the same communication in divergent ways. In digital environments characterized by rapid circulation and emotional engagement, such interpretive differences can quickly intensify communicative tensions.

Scholarly explanations of digital conflict have typically emphasized technological affordances and psychological dynamics. Studies on online disinhibition suggest that anonymity and reduced social cues may encourage more aggressive expression than in face-to-face communication (Suler, 2004; Lapidot Lefler & Barak, 2012). Other scholars focus on the role of algorithms and platform governance in amplifying emotionally engaging content and shaping public discourse (Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018). These perspectives provide important insights into how digital infrastructures influence communicative behavior.

However, much of this literature is grounded in assumptions derived from Western communication traditions, where communication is often conceptualized as an arena for self-expression, explicit articulation, and discursive confrontation (Carey, 1989; Habermas, 1984). Within these frameworks, disagreement and conflict are frequently interpreted as natural and even productive dimensions of democratic discourse. While such assumptions may be relevant in certain contexts, they are not universally applicable across diverse cultural communication systems.

In Indonesia and many other Asian societies, communication practices are deeply shaped by relational norms that emphasize social harmony, contextual sensitivity, and mutual respect (Kim, 2002; Yum, 1988). Communication is often oriented toward maintaining relational balance rather than asserting individual positions. In such contexts, overt confrontation may be perceived as socially disruptive, while communicative restraint can function as an important strategy for preserving social relationships. These cultural orientations suggest that digital conflict in Indonesia cannot be fully understood through frameworks that assume expressive confrontation as the normative mode of communication.

This paper argues that digital conflict in Indonesia should be understood as emerging from a deeper misalignment between culturally grounded communication epistemologies and the communicative logics embedded in global digital platforms. To conceptualize this condition, the paper introduces the notion of *epistemic friction*, referring to the tensions that arise when harmony-oriented communication practices encounter digital infrastructures designed to privilege visibility, immediacy, and emotional engagement. By examining digital conflict through this perspective, the paper contributes to broader efforts to decolonize communication theory and to develop more culturally grounded approaches to understanding digital communication in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

Despite the growing body of research on digital conflict, much of the existing scholarship remains primarily focused on technological affordances, platform architectures, and psychological dynamics of online interaction. While these perspectives have significantly advanced our understanding of how digital environments shape communicative behavior, they often overlook the cultural and epistemological foundations that structure communication practices in different societies. In particular, relatively little attention has been given to how culturally grounded communication epistemologies interact with globally standardized digital infrastructures. This limitation is especially evident in studies of digital communication in the Global South, where dominant theoretical frameworks derived from Western communication traditions are frequently applied without sufficient consideration of local cultural contexts (Miike, 2007; Wang, 2011; Thussu, 2009). As a result, digital conflict is often interpreted through models that assume expressive individualism and confrontational discourse as normative forms of communication. Such assumptions may obscure the dynamics of communication in societies where relational harmony, contextual sensitivity, and communicative restraint play central roles in everyday interaction.

Addressing this limitation requires a theoretical approach that recognizes the plurality of communication epistemologies and examines how culturally grounded communication practices encounter the communicative logics embedded in digital platforms. Building on this perspective, this paper introduces the concept of *epistemic friction* to explain how digital conflict emerges from the interaction between harmony-oriented communication practices and platform infrastructures that

privilege visibility, immediacy, and emotional engagement. By situating digital conflict within the broader framework of communication, culture, and decolonization, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts to decolonize communication theory and to develop a more culturally grounded understanding of digital communication dynamics in Indonesia and the wider Southeast Asian region.

2. Method

This study adopts a conceptual approach to examine digital conflict from a decolonizing communication perspective. Rather than relying on empirical data collection, the paper synthesizes existing literature on digital conflict, platform communication, and indigenous communication traditions. Through theoretical integration and conceptual analysis, the study develops the concept of epistemic friction to explain tensions between culturally grounded communication practices and platform mediated communication infrastructures. Illustrative examples from Indonesian digital communication are used to contextualize the proposed conceptual framework.

2.1. Illustrative Context: Digital Conflict in Indonesian Digital Communication

The concept of epistemic friction becomes particularly visible when examined within the contemporary landscape of Indonesian digital communication. Over the past decade, Indonesia has experienced one of the fastest digital transformations in the Global South. The rapid expansion of mobile internet infrastructure, combined with the widespread adoption of social media platforms, has reshaped how individuals participate in public discourse and interpersonal interactions. As of 2023, Indonesia had more than 221 million internet users, while social media penetration continues to expand across demographic groups (APJII, 2023; DataReportal, 2024). Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and X have become central infrastructures for everyday communication, enabling users to share information, express opinions, and engage in collective discussions.

However, this rapid expansion of digital communication has also created new arenas for communicative tension and conflict. Public debates, interpersonal disputes, political controversies, and cultural disagreements increasingly unfold within social media environments where messages circulate rapidly across networked publics. Scholars examining Indonesian digital media have observed that online spaces often amplify emotional narratives, identity-based mobilization, and moral judgment, particularly when controversies attract large audiences (Lim, 2017; Tapsell, 2018). Within such environments, digital conflicts can escalate quickly as narratives circulate across multiple platforms and attract participation from audiences far removed from the original interaction.

A recent example illustrating these dynamics is the widely discussed online controversy involving Dwi Sasetyaningtyas (DS), which circulated extensively across Indonesian social media. What initially appeared to be a localized interpersonal dispute quickly evolved into a broader public controversy as users across platforms began commenting, interpreting, and judging the incident. Thousands of online participants who were not directly involved in the original interaction engaged in discussions, offering moral evaluations, defending particular actors, or criticizing others. The rapid spread of narratives surrounding the case demonstrates how digital communication environments can transform localized interactions into large-scale public conflicts through networked circulation and algorithmic amplification.

This pattern reflects the broader dynamics of networked publics, in which digital platforms enable communication to circulate across interconnected audiences that may interpret the same message differently depending on their social and cultural perspectives (boyd, 2014). As messages travel through digital networks, they are frequently detached from their original context and reinterpreted by new audiences. The phenomenon of context collapse, in which multiple social contexts converge within a single communicative space, further intensifies these dynamics (Marwick & boyd, 2011). When communication intended for a specific relational context becomes visible to diverse audiences with different expectations, misunderstandings, and communicative tensions may emerge.

Within the Indonesian cultural context, these dynamics intersect with communication norms that traditionally emphasize relational harmony and social sensitivity. Communication practices in many Indonesian communities are guided by values that encourage individuals to maintain social balance

and avoid overt confrontation. When such relational communication norms encounter digital environments structured around rapid visibility and expressive engagement, tensions may arise between culturally grounded communicative expectations and platform-mediated communication logics.

In this sense, cases such as the DS controversy illustrate how epistemic friction can manifest in everyday digital communication environments. The rapid escalation of online disputes often reflects not only technological affordances but also the interaction between different communicative expectations operating within digital spaces. Expressions that might be interpreted as socially disruptive within relational communication cultures may gain heightened visibility in digital environments where emotionally expressive discourse is amplified by algorithmic systems.

Moreover, the participatory nature of social media further intensifies the dynamics of epistemic friction. Digital platforms enable users to contribute to the interpretation and circulation of events actively, transforming individual incidents into collective narratives. As users comment, repost, or reinterpret events, the original communicative context may be reshaped through the perspectives of multiple audiences. This participatory process often amplifies emotional responses, moral judgments, and competing narratives, contributing to the escalation of digital conflict.

Understanding these dynamics through the lens of epistemic friction highlights the importance of examining how digital infrastructures interact with culturally grounded communication practices. Rather than viewing digital conflict solely as a technological or behavioral phenomenon, this perspective emphasizes the interaction between communication epistemologies and platform architectures. In the Indonesian case, where communication traditions emphasize relational harmony and contextual sensitivity, digital communication environments structured around visibility and expressive engagement may generate tensions that contribute to the emergence of digital conflict.

By situating contemporary digital controversies within this conceptual framework, it becomes possible to understand better how technological infrastructures reshape communication practices in culturally diverse societies. The Indonesian experience illustrates how the interaction between relational communication traditions and globally standardized digital platforms can produce new forms of communicative tension, highlighting the relevance of epistemic friction as a framework for analyzing digital conflict in Southeast Asian communication ecosystems.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Theoretical Context and Decolonizing Digital Conflict

The rise of digital conflict has generated extensive scholarly attention across communication, media studies, and political communication. Researchers have examined how digital platforms facilitate communicative escalation through mechanisms such as anonymity, reduced social cues, and algorithmic amplification. Early studies of computer-mediated communication highlighted the phenomenon of online disinhibition, where the relative anonymity and invisibility of digital interaction encourage individuals to express opinions more aggressively than in face-to-face contexts (Suler, 2004). Subsequent research has further demonstrated that the absence of immediate social feedback in online environments may increase the likelihood of hostile or confrontational communication (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). These findings suggest that digital environments can significantly reshape communicative behavior by altering the social conditions under which interaction occurs.

In addition to psychological explanations, scholars have increasingly emphasized the structural role of digital platforms in shaping communication dynamics. Social media infrastructures operate through algorithmic systems designed to maximize user engagement, often amplifying emotionally charged and controversial content (Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018). This process contributes to the formation of highly visible and affectively driven online publics in which emotional expression plays a central role in shaping discourse (Papacharissi, 2015). Within such environments, communicative visibility is closely tied to engagement metrics, meaning that content likely to generate strong reactions is more likely to circulate widely. As a result, digital communication systems may

structurally favor forms of expression that intensify conflict rather than facilitate deliberative dialogue (Sunstein, 2017).

While these technological and psychological perspectives have significantly advanced the understanding of digital conflict, they remain largely grounded in theoretical assumptions derived from Western communication traditions. Within these traditions, communication is frequently conceptualized as a process of individual expression, persuasion, and discursive contestation (Carey, 1989; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Public disagreement and argumentation are often understood as legitimate and even productive dimensions of democratic discourse, particularly within frameworks influenced by deliberative democratic theory (Habermas, 1984). Consequently, conflict is often interpreted as a natural outcome of communicative interaction rather than as a disruption of relational equilibrium.

However, the universalization of these assumptions has been increasingly questioned within the broader project of de-Westernizing and decolonizing communication theory. Scholars have argued that dominant communication theories often reflect Western epistemological foundations while marginalizing alternative communication traditions rooted in different cultural contexts (Miike, 2007; Wang, 2011). Communication practices across societies are shaped by culturally specific understandings of relationality, knowledge, and social responsibility. Ignoring these epistemological differences risks imposing theoretical frameworks that may not adequately capture communication dynamics in non-Western settings.

This concern is particularly relevant in the context of digital communication in Asia. Research on Asian communication systems has long emphasized relational interdependence, contextual sensitivity, and the importance of maintaining social harmony within communication practices (Kim, 2002; Yum, 1988). In such relational communication cultures, communicative restraint and indirectness may function as important strategies for sustaining social balance and avoiding relational disruption. Communication is therefore not primarily oriented toward explicit confrontation but toward managing relationships and preserving collective harmony.

The global expansion of digital communication infrastructures introduces communication environments that operate according to different communicative logics. Social media platforms privilege immediacy, visibility, and emotional engagement, often amplifying oppositional discourse and conflictual narratives. When communication practices shaped by relational harmony encounter platform architectures designed around expressive visibility and algorithmic amplification, tensions may emerge between culturally grounded communication norms and digitally embedded communication logics. These tensions cannot be fully explained by technological affordances alone, nor by universal models of communicative behavior.

To address this theoretical limitation, this paper conceptualizes digital conflict as a phenomenon that emerges from an epistemological misalignment between culturally grounded communication practices and platform-mediated communication systems. Rather than viewing digital conflict solely as a consequence of individual behavior or technological design, this perspective emphasizes the interaction between communication epistemologies and digital infrastructures. Building on this perspective, the paper introduces the concept of epistemic friction, referring to the tension that arises when culturally embedded ways of understanding and practicing communication encounter digital environments structured by different communicative assumptions.

By framing digital conflict through the lens of epistemic friction, this paper contributes to the broader project of decolonizing communication theory. It highlights the importance of recognizing epistemological diversity in communication practices and calls for greater attention to indigenous communication frameworks in understanding digital communication dynamics. In doing so, the study provides a conceptual foundation for examining how harmony-oriented communication practices in Indonesia interact with the communicative logics embedded in global digital platforms.

3.2. Indonesian Harmony-Oriented Communication as an Indigenous Communication Epistemology

Communication practices in Indonesia are deeply shaped by cultural orientations that emphasize relational harmony, social balance, and mutual respect. In many Indonesian cultural contexts, communication is not primarily oriented toward the direct expression of individual opinions but toward maintaining relationships and sustaining social equilibrium. These communicative

orientations reflect broader relational values embedded in social life, where interpersonal interaction is guided by sensitivity to context, hierarchy, and communal expectations. Communication, therefore, functions not only as a means of exchanging information but also as a relational practice through which social cohesion is preserved.

Scholars of Asian communication have long argued that communication systems in many Asian societies differ significantly from the expressive and argumentative models that dominate Western communication theory. Yum (1988) explains that communication in many Asian cultures is rooted in relational interdependence, in which individuals are embedded in networks of social relationships and moral obligations. Similarly, Kim (2002) emphasizes that communication practices in Asian contexts often prioritize contextual awareness, relational sensitivity, and indirect expression. These orientations reflect a broader understanding of communication as a relational process that aims to maintain social harmony rather than to assert individual positions.

Within the Indonesian cultural context, these relational communication principles are reflected in widely recognized cultural values such as *rukun* (social harmony), *tepa selira* (empathetic consideration for others), and *gotong royong* (cooperation). These values encourage individuals to regulate communicative behavior in ways that preserve relational stability and avoid social disruption. Communication is therefore often conducted through indirect expression, symbolic cues, and communicative restraint, allowing disagreement to be negotiated without overt confrontation. Geertz's (1973) classic analysis of Javanese social interaction highlights how maintaining social harmony is a central organizing principle of everyday communication, shaping patterns of politeness, indirectness, and emotional moderation.

These communication patterns can also be understood through the framework of high-context communication, in which meaning is embedded in relational context rather than explicitly articulated in verbal messages (Hall, 1976). In high-context cultures, communication relies heavily on shared social knowledge, contextual cues, and relational awareness. Communicative restraint, silence, or indirect expression may therefore function as meaningful communicative strategies rather than signs of disengagement. Such practices reflect a fundamentally different epistemological orientation in which communication is evaluated not only in terms of clarity or explicitness but also in terms of relational consequences.

Harmony-oriented communication is also closely connected to collectivistic cultural orientations that prioritize group cohesion and relational interdependence. Hofstede (2001) identifies Indonesia as a society with strong collectivist cultural tendencies, in which social relationships and group harmony play a central role in shaping behavior. Within collectivistic communication systems, communicative actions are often evaluated in relation to their impact on social relationships rather than solely on their informational content. Ting-Toomey's (1988) face-negotiation theory further suggests that individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to adopt conflict management strategies aimed at preserving relational harmony and protecting social dignity.

Importantly, harmony-oriented communication should not be interpreted as the absence of disagreement or conflict. Rather, it represents a culturally grounded approach to managing communicative tensions that minimizes relational disruption. Conflict may be addressed through indirect negotiation, mediation, or symbolic communication practices that allow disagreement to be expressed while maintaining relational balance. In this sense, harmony-oriented communication reflects a sophisticated relational epistemology in which communication functions as a mechanism for sustaining social order and mutual coexistence.

Understanding Indonesian communication through this relational lens is particularly important in the context of digital transformation. As communication increasingly takes place within globally standardized digital platforms, the relational norms that guide harmony-oriented communication encounter communication infrastructures structured around different communicative assumptions. Digital platforms are designed to prioritize visibility, speed, and engagement, often amplifying emotionally charged expression and oppositional discourse. When communication practices shaped by relational harmony operate within such environments, tensions may emerge between culturally grounded communication expectations and digitally mediated communication logics.

Conceptualizing Indonesian harmony-oriented communication as an indigenous epistemology of communication, therefore, provides an important foundation for rethinking digital communication

dynamics in Indonesia. Rather than treating Indonesian communication practices as deviations from universal communication norms, this perspective recognizes them as legitimate sources of theoretical insight. Such recognition aligns with broader efforts to decolonize communication theory by foregrounding diverse cultural epistemologies that have historically been marginalized within dominant academic frameworks (Santos, 2014; Smith, 2012).

By situating Indonesian harmony-oriented communication within this epistemological framework, this paper opens a pathway for understanding digital conflict not merely as a technological or behavioral phenomenon but as a manifestation of deeper tensions between culturally grounded communication practices and platform-mediated communication systems. This perspective provides the conceptual foundation for examining how epistemic friction emerges within Indonesian digital communication environments.

3.3. Epistemic Friction and Cultural Misalignment in Digital Communication

To conceptualize this tension, this paper introduces the concept of epistemic friction. Epistemic friction refers to the tension that arises when culturally grounded ways of understanding and practicing communication encounter digital infrastructures structured by different communicative assumptions. Rather than viewing digital conflict solely as a technological or behavioral phenomenon, this concept emphasizes the interaction between communication epistemologies and platform architectures. In digital environments where visibility, immediacy, and engagement are prioritized, communication practices shaped by relational harmony and communicative restraint may be reinterpreted, misaligned, or amplified in ways that contribute to the escalation of conflict.

By foregrounding epistemic friction, this study shifts analytical attention from individual communicative behavior to the broader interaction between cultural knowledge systems and digital communication infrastructures. This perspective provides a theoretical lens for examining how digital conflict emerges in contexts where indigenous communication traditions encounter globally standardized digital platforms.

The expansion of digital communication infrastructures has created globally interconnected communication environments that operate according to specific technological and communicative logics. Social media platforms are not neutral communication tools; rather, they are socio-technical systems designed to structure the interaction, circulation, and visibility of information. Platform architectures prioritize speed, engagement, and algorithmic amplification, often privileging emotionally charged content and oppositional narratives that generate high levels of user interaction (Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018; Van Dijck, 2013). These infrastructures shape how communication is produced, interpreted, and circulated within digital environments.

Algorithmic systems embedded in digital platforms play a central role in shaping communicative dynamics. By prioritizing engagement-driven metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, platform algorithms tend to amplify content that provokes strong emotional reactions (Papacharissi, 2015; Zuboff, 2019). As a result, communicative visibility becomes closely tied to affective intensity and narrative polarization. Within such environments, disagreement and confrontation are often rewarded through increased circulation and visibility, reinforcing communicative patterns that emphasize expressive intensity rather than relational negotiation.

While these platform logics are frequently treated as technologically determined features of digital communication, they also reflect underlying epistemological assumptions about the nature and purpose of communication. Digital platforms are largely designed within socio-cultural contexts that prioritize expressive individualism, public visibility, and discursive competition. These assumptions align closely with Western traditions of communication that conceptualize communication as a space for explicit articulation of individual viewpoints and argumentative engagement (Carey, 1989; Habermas, 1984). Consequently, digital infrastructures tend to privilege communicative forms that foreground visibility, immediacy, and direct expression.

However, when such communication infrastructures operate in cultural contexts shaped by different communicative epistemologies, tensions may emerge. In societies where communication practices emphasize relational harmony, contextual sensitivity, and indirect negotiation, the expressive and confrontational dynamics encouraged by digital platforms may disrupt established communicative norms. This tension between culturally grounded communication practices and

platform-mediated communication logics can generate new forms of communicative instability within digital environments.

To conceptualize this condition, this paper introduces the concept of epistemic friction. Epistemic friction refers to the tension that arises when culturally embedded ways of knowing and practicing communication encounter digital communication systems structured by different epistemological assumptions. Rather than being caused solely by technological affordances or individual behavioral tendencies, digital conflict in this perspective emerges from the interaction between distinct communicative epistemologies.

Epistemic friction becomes particularly visible when communicative expectations rooted in relational communication cultures encounter digital environments that reward visibility and rapid expression. Practices such as communicative restraint, indirect expression, and contextual negotiation may lose their relational meaning when translated into digital platforms that prioritize immediacy and algorithmic amplification. In such environments, messages that were originally intended to preserve social harmony may be interpreted as ambiguous or avoidance. At the same time, direct expressions amplified through digital networks may be perceived as disproportionately confrontational.

The phenomenon of context collapse further intensifies epistemic friction within digital communication environments. Social media platforms collapse multiple audiences into shared communicative spaces, exposing messages to individuals with different cultural assumptions, relational expectations, and interpretive frameworks (boyd, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011). As communication circulates across heterogeneous audiences, shared contextual cues that normally guide interpretation may be weakened or lost. This collapse of communicative context increases the likelihood of misunderstanding, reinterpretation, and escalation of conflict.

Importantly, epistemic friction does not imply that digital conflict results solely from cultural incompatibility. Rather, it highlights the relational interaction between technological infrastructures and culturally grounded communication practices. Digital platforms extend particular communicative logics across diverse cultural contexts, often reshaping local communication dynamics in ways that may not align with existing social norms. In this sense, digital infrastructures can function as epistemological environments that privilege certain communicative assumptions while marginalizing others (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Understanding digital conflict through the lens of epistemic friction, therefore, shifts analytical attention from individual communicative behavior to the broader interaction among culture, technology, and knowledge systems. This perspective allows digital conflict to be understood as an epistemological phenomenon rather than merely a behavioral or technological one. By recognizing the role of culturally grounded communication epistemologies, the concept of epistemic friction provides a framework for examining how digital communication infrastructures interact with indigenous communication traditions.

In the Indonesian context, this interaction is particularly significant because communication practices are deeply influenced by relational norms that emphasize social harmony and collective coexistence. When these practices encounter digital infrastructures designed to privilege expressive visibility and rapid engagement, tensions may emerge, manifesting as digital conflict. Conceptualizing these tensions as epistemic friction provides a theoretical lens for understanding how digital communication systems interact with culturally grounded communication practices in Indonesia and other societies with relational communication traditions.

3.4. Epistemic Friction and Cultural Misalignment in Digital Communication

The discussion presented in this paper highlights the limitations of dominant frameworks used to explain digital conflict. Much of the existing scholarship approaches digital conflict primarily through technological or psychological explanations, focusing on platform architectures, algorithmic amplification, and behavioral dynamics of online interaction. While these perspectives have significantly contributed to understanding how digital environments shape communicative behavior, they often overlook the cultural and epistemological foundations that structure communication practices across societies.

The dominance of Western communication theory within global academic discourse has historically shaped how communication phenomena are conceptualized and analyzed. As several scholars have noted, communication research has long been influenced by theoretical traditions developed primarily within Western intellectual contexts (Curran & Park, 2000; Thussu, 2009). These traditions often assume communication as a process centered on individual expression, argumentation, and discursive contestation. Consequently, conflict is frequently interpreted as a natural outcome of communicative engagement rather than as a disruption of relational balance.

However, communication practices are deeply embedded in culturally specific epistemologies that shape how individuals interpret meaning, negotiate relationships, and manage disagreement. Scholars advocating the de-Westernization of communication theory have emphasized the importance of recognizing diverse cultural frameworks in the study of communication (Miike, 2007; Wang, 2011). Rather than treating Western communication models as universal standards, these perspectives call for theoretical approaches that acknowledge the plurality of communication epistemologies across societies.

In this context, examining digital conflict through the concept of epistemic friction contributes to broader efforts to decolonize communication theory. The framework proposed in this paper highlights how digital conflict may emerge from the interaction between globally standardized digital infrastructures and culturally grounded communication practices. Digital platforms are not merely technological systems but also epistemological environments that privilege certain communicative logics while marginalizing others. As digital infrastructures expand globally, they may inadvertently impose communicative norms aligned with expressive individualism and algorithmic visibility.

Recognizing epistemic friction allows scholars to reconsider digital conflict as a phenomenon shaped not only by technological design but also by the encounter between different communication epistemologies. In societies where communication traditions emphasize relational harmony, contextual awareness, and social sensitivity, the communicative dynamics encouraged by digital platforms may produce tensions that manifest as digital conflict. These tensions do not necessarily reflect a failure of communication but rather the interaction between competing communicative frameworks operating within digital environments.

The Indonesian case discussed in this paper illustrates how culturally grounded communication practices can provide valuable insights for rethinking digital communication theory. Harmony-oriented communication traditions emphasize relational equilibrium, indirect negotiation, and the maintenance of social cohesion. These communicative orientations differ significantly from expressive models that prioritize visibility and discursive confrontation. By incorporating such indigenous communication epistemologies into the study of digital communication, scholars can develop more culturally grounded theoretical frameworks capable of explaining communication dynamics in diverse social contexts.

From this perspective, decolonizing digital conflict theory involves expanding the analytical scope of communication research to include culturally embedded ways of understanding communication. Rather than positioning non-Western communication practices as deviations from universal norms, this approach recognizes them as legitimate sources of theoretical insight. Such recognition contributes to the development of a more pluralistic communication scholarship that reflects the diversity of communicative traditions across the Global South.

Furthermore, the concept of epistemic friction opens new avenues for future research on digital communication. Scholars may explore how different cultural communication epistemologies interact with platform architectures in various regional contexts, including Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Comparative studies examining how relational communication traditions adapt to digitally mediated environments may provide further insights into the dynamics of digital conflict across cultures. Such research would not only enrich communication theory but also help develop more culturally responsive approaches to digital governance and platform design.

Ultimately, situating digital conflict within the broader project of decolonizing communication theory allows scholars to move beyond technologically deterministic explanations and toward a more holistic understanding of communication in the digital age. By foregrounding indigenous

communication epistemologies and examining their interaction with global digital infrastructures, the framework of epistemic friction offers a conceptual foundation for rethinking digital communication dynamics in culturally diverse societies. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing efforts to build a more inclusive and globally grounded communication theory.

4. Conclusion

Understanding digital conflict through the lens of epistemic friction highlights the importance of examining how digital communication infrastructures interact with culturally grounded communication practices. Rather than treating digital conflict as a universal phenomenon driven solely by technological affordances, this perspective recognizes the plurality of communication epistemologies across societies. Incorporating indigenous communication frameworks, such as Indonesian harmony-oriented communication, enables scholars to develop more culturally grounded theoretical approaches to digital communication.

By conceptualizing digital conflict through the lens of epistemic friction, this paper contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize communication theory. Rather than treating Western communication models as universally applicable, the framework proposed here emphasizes the importance of recognizing diverse communication epistemologies across cultural contexts. Incorporating indigenous communication perspectives, such as Indonesian harmony-oriented communication, enables scholars to develop more culturally grounded theoretical frameworks that can explain digital communication dynamics across diverse societies.

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